The Problem of Hell:
Historical Revisionism in the Evangelical Christian Movement

A Senior Research Thesis

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Tamira Beth Stephens
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Project Advisors: Professor Hugh B. Urban, Department of Comparative Studies
& Associate Professor Kristina Sessa, Department of History
& Lecturer Michael McVicar, Department of Comparative Studies

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Farewell Rob Bell.

@JohnPiper[1]

My usual counter-question is "Why are Americans so fixated on hell?" Far more Americans ask me about hell than ever happens in my own country, and I really want to know—Why is it [that] the most prosperous, affluent nation on earth is really determined to be sure that they know precisely who is going to be frying in hell, and what the temperature will be, and so on…So many people, as I say, particularly in American culture, they really want to know the last, fine-tuned details of hell. And it seems to be a part of their faith, often a central part of their faith, that a certain number of people are simply going to go to hell, and we know who these people are.

N.T. Wright[2]

[1] John Piper, Twitter: @JohnPiper. www.twitter.com/#!/JohnPiper/statuses/41590656421863424.
[2] N.T. Wright, Alter Video Magazine, "Wright on Hell & Bell," May 23, 2011, http://www.altervideomagazine.com/2011/05/23/wright-on-hell-bell/.

Introduction

On February 26, 2011, John Piper, one of the leading figures of the contemporary American Evangelical movement, went to Twitter to voice his intense disapproval of a soon-to-be released book titled Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived by the wildly popular pastor Rob Bell.[3] Piper's tweet quickly made national news, prompting responses and commentary from Evangelicals and non-Evangelicals alike, and perhaps doing more for Bell's book than Piper would have liked by giving it an even wider audience. Piper, attaching a link with his tweet to a "careful and devastating review of Bell's book" was only one of many voices coming from the American Evangelical community that was shocked by Bell's supposed dismissal of a real and literal hell.[4] Just a small handful of examples of the kind of reactions Bell's book garnered include comparisons of Bell to the early "heretical" Christian theologian Origen,[5] criticisms of Bell going "seriously wrong" theologically in blog posts,[6] charges of being a "false teacher" and "heretic" by Franklin Graham in an O'Reilly Factor interview,[7] and a personal lambasting by Martin Bashir in an MSNBC interview about the book.[8]

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[3] At one time, numbers of attendants at Bell's sermons reached 7,000, and the church's podcast has been downloaded by over 500,000 people. Bell has had a profound influence on the church he and his wife founded—Mars Hill in Grandville, Michigan—as well as the larger Evangelical community. Harper Collins Publishers, "About the Book." Accessed May 12, 2012. http://www.harpercollins.com/books/Love-Wins-Rob-Bell?isbn=9780062049643&HCHP=TB_Love+Wins.

[4] Justin Taylor, "Rob Bell: Universalist?," *The Gospel Coalition*, accessed May 12, 2012. http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/02/26/rob-bell-universalist/.

[5] David Hayward, "cartoon: Rob Hell," *The NakedPastor*, www.nakedpastor.com/2011/02/28/cartoon-rob-hell/.

[6] Thomas S. Kidd, "For Whom the Bell Tolls: The Audacity of "Love Wins"", *Patheos*, http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/For-Whom-the-Bell-Tolls-The-Audacity-of-Love-Wins-Thomas-Kidd-03-23-2011.html.

[7] "O'Reilly—Franklin Graham," [n.d.], video clip, accessed April 7, 2013, YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=gUryOzK90Ks.

[8] "MSNBC Host Makes Rob Bell Squirm: 'You're Amending The Gospel So That It's Palatable!'," [n.d.], video clip, accessed April 7, 2013, YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=Vg-qgmJ7nzA&feature=endscreen.

In the small 202-page book, Bell asks 281 questions about the reality of hell, presenting what has been understood by some contemporary Evangelicals to be a Universalist approach to Christianity with a flawed understanding of biblical text and historical theology, without giving any definitive answers about the reality of hell or defining itself as a treatise on Christian Universalism.[9] Love Wins is intentionally a book of questions. It is meant to walk through a careful presentation of its argument, allowing readers to determine for themselves what to do with the information. The tactic of question-asking, which is nothing new to Bell, is present with every book he releases. But what has gotten the most attention in the Evangelical movement has not been Bell's writing style or rhetoric, rather it has been what the book is questioning—the reality of a real and literal hell for non-believers. The responses to Bell, due to how Evangelicals have created and maintain their identities based on their belief in a historically linear construction of hell is fascinating, and what will be the focus of this project.

Modern American Evangelical Christianity presents the world with two options: to either believe in the saving grace of Jesus Christ and have the promise of heaven, or reject Christ in this life and eternally suffer a hell of conscious torment after death.[10] For Evangelicals, this dichotomy of belief and eternal destiny is real—it is biblical, and is truly what God has in store for every person he has ever created. A number of questions present themselves in regards to the belief in hell, namely how has the Evangelical movement understood this dichotomy of eternal destiny historically and why is it so utterly problematic to question the actual history of the belief in hell? What happens to Evangelical identity when hell is either contested or outright denied? How are the boundaries of Evangelicalism changing in regards to this problem of hell? What are its implications, and what can this teach us about the study and understanding of religion?

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[9] Question count is my own. Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. (New York, HarperOne: 2011).
[10] John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993), 116.

As I will argue, the doctrine of hell has been continuously debated among all varieties of Christians since the beginning of the religious movement. However, many popular Evangelicals speak of hell as a traditional and indispensable article of faith, rather than one with a contested and heterogeneous history. By comparing what these Evangelicals say about hell to the historical record, and examining the method of discourse in which this particular imagining of hell is disseminated, I will argue that this particular Evangelical construction of hell fails to understand hell as nuanced and contested Christian doctrine, and is also intentionally produced to create specific effects for the Evangelical and non-believer alike. This doctrine of hell, in the context of their historical paradigm, has been continuously used to form and service both personal and group identities, as well as form and re-form boundaries of Evangelical Christianity. The construct of "us/them" cannot be overlooked in understanding how hell "works" for the Evangelical, as it is crucial to both identity and boundary creation and maintenance.

The fact that Evangelicals have an unrefined and un-nuanced view of history may seem entirely inconsequential, or even too obvious to deserve further attention. However, scholars of religion must take the claims made by any religious believer seriously to understand how religion is used for both identity and boundary formation. How and why the doctrine and history of hell are being used mean something for both the Evangelical and the non-believer. There is something larger going on, and this work is an attempt to understand it in the context of the study of religion—namely Evangelical Christianity.

Before going any further, it is imperative to point out that my definition of Evangelical is precisely that—my definition. I am fully aware of the problems and implications of writing about "Evangelicals" or "the Evangelical movement" as one homogenous entity, wherein which no such thing actually exists. However, as I will fully develop later on, without such constructions

as “Evangelical,” no real work on such a tenuous group of Christians, however problematic or slippery, can be done. Even if my definition or usage of the term “Evangelical” fails to be useful or falls apart entirely, my general thesis and overall work continues to stand.

The debate over hell and eternal destinies is not the only, or even the first, debate among Evangelical Christians, nor is it endemic to Evangelicalism or other variations of Christianity alone. It could very easily be argued that most—if not all—religions or expressions of spirituality deal with the issue of life after death in some way, and this is the way Evangelical Christians are dealing with it for themselves. And while other religions very well may create and shape their identities and boundaries based on this paradigm of heaven versus hell, what continues to be interesting in my research and discussion on hell is how it contains within it arguments over the very definition of Evangelical Christianity, the doctrinal markers of how one is saved, and what these forms of identity and boundary formation mean in the larger contexts of faith, belief, Evangelicalism, and the academic study of religion.

Authors deliberately create for their readers a certain framework in which to illustrate their work and make an argument. I am no exception to this rule. Defining my terms, especially in regards to Evangelical and the Evangelical construction and belief in hell will highlight the theoretical and methodological models in which I situate myself. And as all textual reading is ultimately an extension of interpretation, I will continue and focus on the ways in which Evangelical Christians interpret and use the Bible as a foundation for their beliefs, problematizing the way in which they present their own interpretations as factual and without error or bias. Next, I will delve into the historical record in regards to the belief in hell, investigating certain claims made about the history of this specific belief in hell. I will then move on to what may be considered to be the bulk of the project—the ways in which Evangelical

Christians form and maintain their individual and group identities, as well as the boundary markers for what Evangelicalism *is* by using this belief in hell, concluding with any broader issues and implications due to this project in the study of religion.

Finally, in the vein of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theories on academic reflexivity, it is important to acknowledge any personal stake in this debate that I may have. My position in the conversation is purely academic and professional, and my intent is neither to criticize nor to defend Evangelicalism or this particular point of doctrine. Rather, my goal is to *understand*, and to answer my previously posited questions, being primarily concerned with the historiography of hell, and how the discourse of said history works in a larger context.

Defining Terms—Evangelical

In the study of religion, it becomes necessary to clearly define the terms that will be used, if only to mitigate the possibility of misunderstanding. In this paper, it is imperative to understand what exactly is being said and how, and also who is saying it, who is listening, and how they understand themselves in the larger Christian context. It is important to note that my definition of "Evangelical" is only that—my working definition for the purposes of this particular study. It should not be assumed that everyone comes to the term "Evangelical" with the same understanding of its definition and how it operates within the larger milieu of Christianity. While not all Evangelicals are the exact same, and while not all Evangelicals hold to the same belief in hell, this group of believers that will be my subject are a good representation and cross section to investigate how and why hell is being discussed, as well as the diversity within the Evangelical movement.

As mentioned before, in this study of Evangelical belief in hell I will write about a purposefully self-constructed "group" of Evangelicals where it may seem as though they are all one and the same. This is a fabricated construction born out of necessity for the purposes of this work, and is in no way completely factual on the ground of Evangelicalism—as any scholar of religion would be quick to point out. Every individual believer comes away from "official" church teachings with a different idea of what is being taught, and what even constitutes truth. A hallmark of Evangelicalism is its diversity of churches and individual believers, as each creates what it means to be an Evangelical *in that context*. There is no "Evangelical church," and beyond a handful of alliances between individual Evangelical congregations such as the National

Association of Evangelicals or Great Commission Ministries, no broad coalition of Evangelical churches or believers actually exists.

To problematize the act of defining such a permutable movement, the term "Evangelical" is not mine alone. While I owe a great debt to the historian of religion J.Z. Smith's claim that religion is "solely the creation of the scholar's study…created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization," I am aware that this category is not *only* an academic creation.[11] "Evangelical" is a self-owned category, used by believers and non-believers alike as a marker of a particular expression of faith and as an identifier to the larger worlds around them. However, with that being said, I still argue that the claiming of the ability to define such tenuous movements *for the purposes of study* belongs to the scholar. In The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion, Hugh B. Urban argues that "the case of Scientology reveals that the imagining of religion is by no means solely a product of scholars or academic institutions."[12] While I wholeheartedly agree with Urban's critique of the limits of Smith's claim for a problematic religion such as Scientology, wherein its definition as a *religion* is constantly up for debate, I believe the category of Evangelical is fundamentally different. Unlike Scientology, the question is not whether Evangelical Christianity is a religion. Evangelical Christianity is already accepted as a "religion" under most popular and academic definitions of the term. Rather, the question is whether this particular expression of Christianity, due to its malleable and fluid nature, is able to concretely hold a defining label. The question I am most often asked about my work is not whether Evangelicalism constitutes a religion based on the definition of "religion," but rather focuses on the attempt to create a definition of such a

[11] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), XI.
[12] Hugh B. Urban, *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion.* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 4.

complex movement that struggles with these issues of definition itself. What is at stake for a definition of Evangelicalism then, is not whether we regard it as a religion, but rather what actually makes Evangelicalism a concrete expression of Christianity with definite ideological and theological boundaries. By claiming the ability to define the term "Evangelical" in the spirit of Smith's assertion that the act of defining belongs to the scholar, I attempt to respond to the issue by forming a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, category in order to understand the Evangelical belief in hell for the context of my work.

As I have no desire in attempting an overarching definition of Evangelical, as many others have made it their lives work to attempt such a feat, I will instead call on previously created definitions of the term in order to develop one for my purposes. While these definitions have also been useful in the past and are considered important in religious studies, I find them all at least somewhat lacking, and not entirely suitable here. In reflexive reference to historical definitions of Evangelical, I begin with David Bebbington's definition as Evangelical being comprised of four characteristics—conversion, activism, Biblicism, and Crucicentrism (the importance of Christ's death as atonement for sins)[13]. George Marsden, professor of church history, would add a fifth characteristic to Bebbington's classic definition, "trans-denominationalism, which takes into account evangelicals' pragmatic penchant for cooperation in support of shared projects and evangelistic efforts."[14] The theologian Alister McGrath defines Evangelicalism as being under "six controlling convictions:" Scripture, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, personal conversion, evangelism, and a unique community in which lives are lived out. [15] Finally

[13] David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s.* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-3.
[14] Larry Eskridge, "Defining the Term in Contemporary Times," Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, last modified 2012, http://www.wheaton.edu/ISAE/Defining-Evangelicalism/Defining-the-Term.
[15] Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005).

is Randall Balmer's definition of Evangelical as being "anyone who subscribes to the tenets of evangelicalism. Someone who believes in the centrality of the conversion experience as the criterion for entering the kingdom of heaven. And someone who takes the Bible seriously as God's revelation to humanity, more often to take it literally."[16] On the other side of the aisle, so to speak, however, are scholars who contend that Evangelicalism cannot and will never be concretely defined. Sociologist Christian Smith writes that there is "no single definition of evangelical—due to the construction of evangelical as a useful religious category by researchers and journalists,"[17] and Douglas A. Sweeney, a self-identified Evangelical argues that "there has never been, and there will never be, an evangelical denomination, despite the references one hears to the evangelical church…in short, when viewed from the perspective of our multiplicity, we evangelicals hold hardly anything in common."[18]

I disagree. While acknowledging that the act of defining the term can be challenging, and that no two Evangelicals will share every article of doctrine, I operate under the assumption that "Evangelical" is a useful and the correct term to use. While it would be impossible to count heads based on any kind of roster of Evangelicals as there is no official membership, there *is* a constituency, and whether there is a real and defined "Evangelical Church" does not matter; it is the implied group based on a shared system of belief that does. My definition of Evangelical is as follows: Evangelicals are Christians primarily committed to the Bible as the single source of theology and doctrine, understand God as an omnipotent triune being, experiencing their faith through a personal conversion experience (or is "born-again,") are actively committed to sharing their faith and spreading the Gospel, being active within a larger Evangelical subculture (be it

[16] Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).
[17] Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 2000).
[18] Sweeney.

small congregations or large mega-churches), and—perhaps most importantly—understand Jesus as being the sole figure in which humanity can be saved and redeemed.

And although it may appear obvious, it is important that this definition only encompasses modern American Evangelicals. My research on Evangelical identities and boundaries will be strictly centered on American expressions, within the last twenty or so years. Evangelicalism has had a very long and trans-national history, and it is not my intent to trace either the history of the larger movement, or the history of hell within it. Rather, I will only be looking at these self-professed Evangelicals within this specific time period, and what they are saying about the history of hell in order to form their own identities and boundaries of Evangelicalism.

An Evangelical Hell

The discussion on the Evangelical belief in hell begs the obvious question—*what is hell?* The very brief answer is that it varies among churches and individual believers. It could be successfully argued that no two ideas of hell are exactly alike, and that no place has been speculated about more than hell. While ideas of what hell will be like differ widely, there are several predominant beliefs that circulate among the Evangelical movement. I will only be able to mention a few here, but a more detailed and in depth comparison of these beliefs would be an advantageous project.

First, there is the traditional idea of hell, or what I would colloquially call the "Dante hell." Its imagery of naked men and women being thrown into bottomless pits of fire and brimstone may be somewhat over-exaggerated to some modern believers, but not by much for others. John Piper, using Biblical passages as evidentiary proof, describes hell as being a place of "unquenchable fire," "eternal fire," "eternal punishment," "conscious eternal torment," and "destruction."[19] In Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshear's Doctrine: What Every Christian Should Believe, they write "At the end of the age, the Devil will be 'thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.' Hell will be ruled by Jesus, and human and demon alike, including Satan, will be tormented there continually."[20]

Second, the more modern and less "literal" idea of hell is of hell being a separation from God. No exact details are given besides the idea that the unbeliever will live apart from God for eternity. This view relies heavily on the concept of "common grace," where even the non-

[19] Piper, 166-122.
[20] Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* (Illinois: Crossway, 2010), 425.

Christian can experience God's grace and love while alive on earth. Campus Crusade for Christ, a national Evangelical organization espouses this idea, stating in their Statement of Purpose their belief that "At physical death the unbeliever enters immediately into eternal, conscious separation from the Lord and awaits the resurrection of his body to everlasting judgment and condemnation."[21] Millard J. Erickson, in "The State of the Question" also accepts this view, writing, "At the great final judgment, all humans will be separated on the basis of their relationship to Christ during this life…Those who have not accepted [Jesus] will experience hell, a place of unending suffering, where they will be eternally separated from God."[22]

Finally, there is the disavowal of any kind of concrete speculation or belief of what hell will be like. In a refutation against Universalism, the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals (ACUTE) write, "While rejecting Universalism as a theological position, we would nevertheless emphasize that God's mercy might extend further than we can legitimately contemplate."[23] And again in Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle's Erasing Hell, they write "while the [Biblical] passages examined in this book are clear about hell as a real place where the wicked will be tormented, the Bible does not seem to tell us exactly what that torment will entail."[24]

However interesting, what hell is or what it will be like is not the fundamental issue in the Evangelical belief in hell. Rather, it is the belief that non-believers will suffer eternally for their mortal rejection of Christ. The specifics of hell could be described as an intra-Evangelical

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[21] Campus Crusade for Christ, "Statement of Faith," last modified 2013, http://www.cru.org/about-us/statement-of-faith/index.htm.
[22] Millard J. Erickson, "The State of the Question," in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, ed. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, (Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 1991), 24.
[23] ACUTE, *The Nature of Hell: A Report by the Evangelical Commission on Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals (ACUTE)* (London: ACUTE, 2000), 34.
[24] Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell: What God Said About Eternity, and the Things We Made Up* (Colorado: David C. Cook, 2011), 155.

debate, rather than one that (for now) would cause complete ideological and theological splits and divides. In the film *Hellbound?,* Mark Driscoll describes this debate using political terms. The debate over the physical description of hell is like, to Driscoll, an inner-national debate, one that goes on within the defined borders of a country. However, the debate over *who* goes to hell and *why* is an international debate, one that goes on between defined nations. Evangelicalism then, to Driscoll, is a defined religion with concrete borders, where there is room for difference over what hell will be like, yet who is in hell has been determined and is unchangeable within the boundaries of Evangelical Christianity.[25] Apart from this question of the specific nature of hell, to these Evangelicals I am discussing here, there is no argument over whether hell is real or literal. It exists, and non-believers will spend eternity there, regardless of what it will be like.

Historically, Evangelicals have had a tense relationship with the subject of hell. On the one hand, they firmly believe that faith in Jesus' death and resurrection is absolutely indispensable for salvation. Yet, it is not surprising that many refrain from focusing on the issue, instead choosing to highlight the promise of heaven in an attempt not to alienate those they are trying to reach. However, while largely unacknowledged, or at least mitigated by Evangelicals, there have always been moments in time where the issue of the reality of hell creeps up, making its way into the common discourse of Evangelicalism. As I continue, I will not only address what Evangelicals are saying and some of the Scriptural references they are making in regards to hell, but also what they are saying about the *past*, and how they are understanding themselves and their faith in the larger historical context of Christianity.

While this idea of a literal and populated hell may vary among individuals, as most things do, many Evangelical churches and their members embrace the belief.[26] Even when the existence

[25] Mark Driscoll, *Hellbound?*, Film, directed by Kevin Miller (2012), Film.
[26] Robin Parry, "Evangelical Universalism: Oxymoron?" *Evangelical Quarterly*, (Vol. 84, Issue 1: 2012), 4.

of hell is lamented, much like C.S. Lewis does in writing "there is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power,"[27] hell is not openly questioned because it is widely understood that it has the complete authority of the historical record, Scripture, and of God. For an Evangelical fully committed to the total inerrancy of the Bible, verses which seem to advocate the belief in a literal hell are incontrovertible. When Evangelicals refer to or describe themselves as being "saved," hell is the literal place from which they are being saved. In Doctrine, Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears write,

> Heaven is all about getting to be with Jesus and all the people who love him and, like us, want to be like him. It is totally light, full of brightness and color, and completely real. We want to be there because Jesus is there. We get to dwell in the personal presence of the One who is infinitely greater than we will ever be. To anyone but a lover of Jesus, this existence would be hell itself! For those who love him, there could be no greater pleasure.[28]

In comparison, they continue:

> Hell is real and terrible. It is eternal. There is no possibility of amnesty or reprieve. Daniel says that some of the dead will be resurrected 'to shame and everlasting contempt.' [Daniel 12:2] Jesus says, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels…And these will go away into eternal punishment.' [Matthew 25:41][29]

For the most part, Evangelicals like Driscoll and Breshears understand the heaven and hell in this way: Accept Jesus as an Evangelical believer, go to heaven. Refuse Jesus as a non-believer, go to hell. In the report printed by ACUTE, they claim that "traditionally, evangelical Christians have understood the Bible to teach that hell is a place of unending physical and psychological punishment, and that with the possible exceptions of children who die in infancy, the mentally disabled and those who never hear the gospel, it awaits all who die without faith in

[27] C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (HarperCollins, 2009) Kobo edition, chap. 8.
[28] Driscoll and Breshears, 423-4.
[29] Ibid. 425.

Jesus Christ."[30] It is important to reiterate this dialectical relationship that makes up this "traditional" idea of the Evangelical doctrine of hell—that non-believers, *by refusing Christ in this life,* are sentenced to hell. Sin and the quality of one's life do not necessarily matter to the Evangelical (although this is an ongoing issue in the movement,) rather the emphasis is placed on *the individual decision* to accept or reject Christ.

The way that hell is popularly interpreted by many Evangelicals can be understood as a violent threat to non-believers, and something to escape from by becoming (and remaining) a Christian. John Piper, the popular pastor who bid farewell to the aforementioned Rob Bell, describes hell as a place of "eternal conscious torment," going on to say that hell is "a fire that will not be extinguished and therefore a punishment that will not end," a place of "unending misery of those who go there,"[31] and "the eternal fire is explicitly 'punishment,' and its opposite is eternal life. [Mark 9:43-48]"[32] Paul Alan Laughlin, from Otterbein College, writes that Christian thinkers have "elaborated on the horrors of hell as a place of fiery and unrelenting punishment."[33] Hell, as presented, is an awful place, and somewhere no sane person would want to go—especially for eternity.

Before Bell's Love Wins in 2011, it was difficult to find a popular Evangelical treatise on the belief of hell. Hell never went away, but it cannot be denied that the theological arguments on the subject took a backseat to more popularly salient issues like abortion and gay marriage. Rather than being in the forefront, hell was the other option when presenting Christianity to a potential convert. Yet, there were a small handful of theologians and authors writing about the topic of hell and its alternatives before today's veritable explosion of hell discourse. Richard J.

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[30] ACUTE, 2.
[31] Piper, 116.
[32] Ibid, 117.
[33] Paul Alan Laughlin, *Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know but Probably Doesn't* (California: Polebridge Press, 2000), 166.

Bauckham's 1979 article on Universalism—the belief that eventually everyone can and will be saved by God regardless of their faith while alive—is popularly and commonly cited by Evangelicals writing on the subject today. Rather than being a defense for the doctrine of hell, Bauckham's article is a historical argument against Universalism. He presents Universalism as being a fairly recent phenomenon outside the purview of mainstream Christianity, writing:

> Until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell. Here and there, outside the theological mainstream, were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated (in its commonest form this is the doctrine of 'conditional immortality'). Even fewer were the advocates of universal salvation, though these few included some major theologians of the early church. Eternal punishment was firmly asserted in official creeds and confessions of the churches. It must have seemed as indispensable a part of universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. Since 1800 this situation has entirely changed, and no traditional Christian doctrine has been so widely abandoned as that of eternal punishment.[34]

Bauckham continues, writing that Universalism was "not uncommon in the East during the fourth and fifth centuries," having been influenced by early Church father Origen, and was "regarded as an open question."[35] Yet, he is quick to mention that both Origen and this brand of theology were condemned and declared heresy in 543, thereby casting Origen and Universalism off as contrary to "Orthodox" Christianity.[36] While, to Bauckham's credit, he does point out that "in the West, not only Origen's heretical reputation but also Augustine's enormous influence ensured that the Augustinian version of the doctrine of hell prevailed almost without question for many centuries," he refrains from pushing this possible problem of the influence of Augustine as being a very real reason for why the doctrine of hell "won" over Universalism.[37] As Bauckham's argument continues, he writes about three other theologians who have discussed the possibility

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[34] Richard J. Bauckham, "Universalism: a historical survey," *Themelios* 4, Issue 2 (January 1979): 48-54, http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/archive.
[35] Ibid, 49.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid, 50.

of an alternative to his idea of hell, but quickly and succinctly brushes them off as "modern," "guilty of contradicting" creeds, "less common," "non-traditional," disagreeing with the text of the Bible, on par with the heresies of Origen.[38]

It is important the historical tone of Bauckham's argument. That according to Bauckham, the proliferation of Universalism, or denying the reality of hell and asserting that everyone will be saved, is an event only now getting widespread acceptance in Christianity. That up until now, the discussion of hell has been closed, and no longer (if ever) up for serious debate. Sure, there may have been one or two dissenters, but like all other heresies, they were dismissed—never to be heard of again. What this style of argument means for the Evangelical today, how they are using it to present their own ideas about hell and the afterlife, will be more formally discussed later.

In Robert A. Peterson's Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment, published over fifteen years before Love Wins, hell is presented as being on trial, with Peterson acting as its defender. If the idea that someone would willingly, and even happily, write a defense on the doctrine of hell wasn't odd enough, he sets the book up with "witnesses" in order to testify for the defense—different portions of the Bible, and the history of hell as thought by important church leaders.[39] While his "defense" of hell by using the Bible is intriguing, my focus will be on Peterson's historical arguments, as they are perhaps the more problematic of the two.

Peterson quickly goes to work—referencing Bauckham's aforementioned article, and his assertion that common teaching on hell only changed after the nineteenth century.[40] As Peterson writes about the early church father Origen, he reminds the reader that Origen was "most

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1995), 17.
[40] Ibid 97.

remembered as the father of universalism and judged heretical after his death."[41] Peterson casts Origen aside, asking

> How are we to evaluate Origen's vision of all things coming from God in the beginning and returning to him in the end? Despite his efforts to prove it from Scripture, 'the final unity of all things with God is more Platonic than biblical in inspiration.' His theology was greatly shaped by his commitment to revived Platonic philosophy. This commitment influenced each doctrine, in this case casting a Christian view of last things in terms of the Platonic idea of flow and return vial purifying punishments.[42]

While, to be fair, Peterson does acknowledge the scope of influence Origen's theology had later into the future, but he only references it in regards to one particular person—John Scotus Erigena of the Middle Ages, and as Erigena being *the only* theologian to teach Universalism.[43] After briefly brushing over Arnobius and delving deeper into the "incalculable influence upon subsequent Christianity" of Augustine, Peterson jumps to the eleventh century to discuss Thomas Aquinas, writing, "The most eminent of medieval theologians joins Tertullian and Augustine in teaching the orthodox view of the fate of the wicked. So do the major Reformers, as we shall see."[44] Peterson concludes his historical survey of the doctrine of hell by asserting that "eternal punishment was the predominant view of the church through the time of the Reformation," and that only Origen and Arnobius were the defectors of this view.[45] Any other thought against, or disagreement about, the doctrine of an eternal and literal hell have been reserved for the "modern period," and even they are few and far between. Included in his "modern" discussion of hell's detractors are William Whiston (1667-1752) who had an emotional response that led him to espouse the problematic doctrine of annihilationism where the

[41] Ibid, 100.
[42] Ibid, 102.
[43] Ibid, 103.
[44] Ibid, 110.
[45] Ibid 114-5.

wicked will be ultimately destroyed rather than suffering for eternity,[46] Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) who is regarded by Peterson as "the father of liberal theology," "rejecting the doctrine of hell because it does not appeal to modern notions of God and human sympathy,"[47] F.D. Maurice (1805-72) who was actually in fact a Unitarian and *not* a Christian in the traditional sense and was, according to Peterson, "fired for a *modification* of the doctrine of hell; he neither condemned the traditional view nor asserted dogmatically that all would be saved."[48] Even the air of impropriety around the doctrine of hell was reason enough to be fired from his job, as it was such an aberration to Peterson. Finally, he finishes his discussion of hell's detractors with both F.W. Farrar and E.B. Pusey in the late 19th-early 20th centuries.[49]

In the years following Rob Bell's publication of Love Wins, a small handful of books have been released, all with the specific intent of delegitimizing Bell and arguing for this specific and "traditional" view of hell. Among them are Erasing Hell: What God Said About Eternity, and the Things We Made Up by Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle, God Wins: Heaven, Hell, and Why the Good News Is Better than *Love Wins* by senior managing editor of the popular Evangelical publication *Christianity Today* Mark Galli, and Michael E. Wittmer's Christ Alone: An Evangelical Response to Rob Bell's *Love Wins*. It is notable, and worth mentioning, that all of these books either directly reference Bell or his book in the actual titles, or make allusions to it by a play on words. Even the covers themselves bear a striking resemblance to Bell's Love Wins, perhaps an intentional decision made by several people involved with the publications. The effects are striking, and not altogether subtle—as they were intended. Each book challenges Bell directly as a cohesive argument not only for hell, but against Bell as a heretical and false teacher.

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[46] Ibid 122.
[47] Ibid, 127.
[48] Ibid, 128.
[49] Ibid, 129.

In Chan and Sprinkle's Erasing Hell, they refer back to the aforementioned Bauckham article from 1979. The choice to quote the dated article, itself a response to the problem of hell, is an example of the problematic move of self-referencing as a valid argument. What I am left with, after seeing the same article referenced several times over by different authors at different times is the question of *why*? Why is this one article sufficient evidence for the reality of hell? I contend that this move accentuates the lack of a clear and nuanced view of history for the Evangelical theologian, rather allowing for this evidentiary weak argument. Self-referencing, as done in this way, is not a valid argument, nor is it altogether interesting. Providing contestation from one source is historically problematic, yet is what we see being done here. Rather, what it is and what it represents is a calculated move by the author to create new discourses of authority through ideas of doctrine and history—thus necessarily creating its opposite of false authority and false teaching. Anyone who would openly disagree with the Bauckham article would be considered as such, and cast aside much in the way Rob Bell has been.

The authors then go on to contend that Origen was not always consistent in his Universalism, either attempting to redeem Origen and his ideas, or mentioning it briefly because there is no other way around it.[50] Interestingly, while writing "advocates [for an alternative idea of hell] were always a minority," they find two other detractors to mention that have not been referenced by other Evangelicals up until this point—George T. Knight of the 1850s and Gerrard Winstanly, of the 1600s.[51] They go into an abbreviated discussion of the Jewish ideas and philosophies on hell, arguing that the Jews had a concrete definition of what hell was, and how that influenced early Christian thought. While Mark Galli's God Wins is a review and attack on the arguments of Bell's Love Wins, the crux of his argument lies in the exegetical readings and

[50] Chan and Sprinkle, 23.
[51] Ibid.

understandings of Biblical texts. In 152 pages, Galli spends just under three full pages on the history of the question of hell, rather choosing to focus on his interpretation of the Bible and who and what he understands God and Jesus to be. In the three pages Galli does mention the problem of history; he brushes off major issues with "[Universalism] was condemned by the early universal church council that met at Constantinople in 543." "The view has not found favor with any significant theologian of the church since." "One can count on one's hands the number of prominent Christians who have held this view throughout the ages." "It has been rejected by Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, and Protestants, and there is good reason for that." and finally "It is a matter of debate whether [Clement and Gregory of Nyssa] were Universalists."[52] However, much like Chan and Sprinkle, Galli mentions quickly in passing two other possible detractors—George Macdonald and William Law—that up until now have been left out of the Evangelical's discussions on hell, again presenting clear evidence to the fact that the Evangelical construction of the history of hell as a continuous doctrine and a very small number of people who would argue against it is slightly askew.

Finally, the last of the widely distributed books written for the express purpose of refuting Rob Bell's claims in Love Wins is Michael Wittmer's Christ Alone. Christ Alone presents perhaps the most concrete example of revisionism in regards to the history of the belief in hell. Much like the other authors we have seen, Wittmer does own up to the fact that there *were* theologians and people who questioned the doctrine of hell, but he only goes as far as saying that there were only a handful in antiquity, and that they taught the heretical doctrine of Universalism, leaving no room for alternative views of hell, such as Annihilationism:

> The center of Bell's chapter on universalism throws a lengthy bouquet in its direction. He writes that not only is the Christian faith 'big enough, wide enough, and generous

[52] Mark Galli, *God Wins: Heaven, Hell, and Why the Good News is Better than Love Wins* (United States: Tyndale, 2011), 118-9.

> enough' to make room for universalism (p. 110), but also universalism has been 'at the center of the Christian tradition since the first church' (p. 109). Actually, this is historically incorrect. There have always been stray universalists popping up here and there, mostly in the East and mostly enormously influenced by Plato. Ever name that Bell lists as a universalist (p. 107) belongs to the philosophical family of Origen (except Clement, who anticipated and influenced Origen's thought). But this Origen school is the exception which proves the rule: the center, circumference, and everything in between of the Christian tradition have always held that some people unfortunately end up in hell.[53]

Besides the Biblical hermeneutics that Wittmer delves in, which more or less resemble every other Evangelical's Biblical defense of hell, these are the claims he makes about the history of the doctrine of hell. That the "Christian" tradition has *always* held to the same tenets and doctrine regarding hell, and implicit in his argument is the idea that anyone outside of this doctrine is not a Christian.[54]

The "careful and devastating review of Bell's book" that was attached to the tweet sent by John Piper that effectively cast Rob Bell into the shadows of Evangelicalism was the reactionary online review of Bell's book, written by Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor of the University Reformed Church in East Lansing, Michigan.[55] In it, DeYoung attacks Bell's claims in a logical and consistent manner, presenting his objections as being indispensable due to the kind of effect Bell's book can have on the larger church as a whole. DeYoung, like many of the other Evangelical apologists for hell, makes specific historical claims in reference to the

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[53] Michael E. Wittmer, *Christ Alone: An Evangelical Response to Rob Bell's Love Wins* (Michigan: Edenridge Press: 2011), 68.

[54] With the caveat that I could be incorrect, all of the Evangelical arguments for hell that I have researched and noted here have used more or less the same Biblical passages in order to defend their view of hell, coming mostly from Daniel, Isaiah, and the four Gospels. As teasing out the subtleties of the how and why this is the case is not in the scope of my project, nor is an interrogation of these verses from an academic and critical point of view advantageous to my general thesis, I will not be going any further in this regard. However, as I hope to continue this research on the Evangelical doctrine of hell, I will place it aside as a possible future project, as it has definite merit and can also lead to a greater understanding of how personal exegesis works and the importance believers place on specific verses.

[55] It should be noted that DeYoung is part of the specific Reformed Christian denomination. Understanding that some may have issue with DeYoung being labeled as an Evangelical, this is precisely one of the reasons I have defined Evangelical the way I have. Evangelical does not require an allegiance to any one denomination, nor is it strictly "non-denominational." Evangelicals inhabit all varieties of denominational Christian churches, and neither church membership nor official affiliation is required. What is required by my definition of Evangelical is that they hold to the tenets I have previously and carefully laid out, which DeYoung quite obviously does.

doctrine—chief among them being that "*Love Wins* is such a departure from historic Christianity, that there's no easy way to tackle it…To fully engage the material would require not only deconstruction, but a full reconstruction of orthodoxy theology."[56] In order to understand what kinds of claims DeYoung continues to make, and the way in which he does it, it is important to reiterate some of the most salient:

> Bell maintains he is not saying anything new. And that's right. The problem is he makes it sound like his everyone-ends-up-restored-and-reconciled-to-God theology is smack dab in the center of the Christian tradition.[57]

> Whatever Origen's influence on the Cappadocian fathers (and it was considerable,) Origen's views were later refuted by Augustine and, as Bauckham notes, condemned in 543 in a council at Constantinople.[58]

> Universalism has been around a long time. But so has every other heresy. Arius rejected the full deity of Christ and many people followed him. This hardly makes Arianism part of the wide, diverse stream of Christian orthodoxy…True, many recent liberal theologians have argued for versions of universalism—and this is where Bell stands, not in the center of the historic Christian tradition.[59]

DeYoung's problems with Bell, rather than being strictly historical, actually stem more from Bell's claims of orthodoxy in regards to his alternative view of hell, and Bell's claim of authority by writing such an argument that DeYoung so forcefully disagrees with. It's not enough that Bell is patently incorrect, but the fact that Bell can claim Christian authority for himself while being wrong in his theology sets DeYoung off, and down the road that led to his response to Bell's book.

In order to understand how the issue of hell is being dealt with "on the ground," so to speak, and not just online and in bookstores, it is important to look at sermons some Evangelicals are giving and hearing—and to see how hell, along with its history—is being presented. First is

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[56] Kevin DeYoung, "God is Still Holy and What You Learned in Sunday School is Still True: A Review of *Love Wins* by Rob Bell," *The Gospel Coalition*, March 14, 2011, thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung, 5.
[57] Ibid, 6.
[58] Ibid, 7.
[59] Ibid, 8.

Peter Merry's presentation at Rick Warren's Saddleback Church. The abstract of the sermon reads:

> In this seminar, guest speaker Peter Merry will discuss what the Bible has to say about Heaven and Hell, while also examining many of the popular misconceptions that have been presented in our culture. Finally, we will explore some of the distortions that have been promoted as 'Biblical' by some groups, including cults. Our lives here will be incredibly short compared to our existence in eternity.[60]

In this "seminar," as it is billed, Merry describes hell through Biblical interpretation as being "horrifying" (Isaiah 66:24, Luke 16:23-24) "Everlasting" (Daniel 12:2, Mark 9:43, 2 Thess 1:9) "Lonely" (Luke 16:26, 2 Thess 1:9) and "Lucid" (Psalm 55:15, Rev 20:10, 15.) This is Merry's (and by extension, Saddleback Church's) definition of what hell will be like, and the reason one goes there.[61] In an Easter sermon given to New Spring Church in 2009, Perry Noble presents an argument for hell, again based entirely on the Bible, creating this type of orthodox Evangelical doctrine from nothing other than Scripture. It is worth noting here that Noble uses the argument that "God only gives you want you want when He sends you to hell for not believing in Him" line of reasoning that appears to be common in the Evangelical culture. Evangelical sermons are rife with this rhetoric, putting the onus of salvation on the individual, rather than on the believer or even on God. Noble also defines Christianity as being "too narrow" to allow for any other kind of doctrine—that it is the only way to God, and all other religions are false.[62] Mark Driscoll, the pastor of the mega-church Mars Hill, gave a sermon titled "Heaven and Hell," only a month after the release of Love Wins. The sermon as given is an obvious response to Bell and his arguments, as much of what Driscoll says about people who would disagree with his treatment on hell seem so largely directed at Bell himself, you're left

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[60] Peter Merry, "Is There Life After Death?", Saddleback Church, March 11, 2008. http://www.saddleback.com.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Perry Noble, "Highway to Hell," New Spring Church, April 12, 2009. http:www.newspring.cc/series/the-gospel/highway-to-hell/

wondering whether Bell heard it and what his reaction would have been. In the sermon, Driscoll claims that it is his intent to teach the Bible and tell the truth, because Jesus tells the truth, and he only wants to reiterate what Jesus has said. His claims are backed not by himself or his own reasoning, but by God through Jesus and the Bible. Driscoll goes through post-death options, laying them out methodically and intentionally, refuting every one through use of Biblical texts and his authority as pastor. It is probably more important here to mention what Driscoll *does not* say rather than what he does, especially as this sermon is such an obvious response to Love Wins. He does not make any argument about the nature of hell or of God from anything other than the Bible, and there is no claim of historical orthodoxy besides presenting Biblical text.[63] As Evangelicals seem to be so focused on being based on the Bible along, Driscoll's approach is not surprising, but it is confusing—especially when remembering that his arguments to come will revolve around the historical record in relation to the doctrine of hell. And while not a sermon per se, Hank Hanegraff, or "The Bible Answer Man" as he advertises himself, hosts a popular Evangelical radio show through his Christian Research Institute. In an interview with author Lee Strobel who has written one of the most used evangelism tools to date—The Case for Christ—they discuss Hanegraff's recent book about hell and what it will be like. Interestingly, much like Driscoll's sermon, neither Hanegraff nor Strobel give any kind of historical reasoning for hell being traditional Christian doctrine, rather, they rely solely on the Bible as being "an objective reference point," the way to "test a subjective experience" about hell, and "the final quote of arbitration." The argument is that hell is Biblical; therefore it is orthodox, and truthful.[64]

Finally, another popular method of arguing for the reality of hell comes in the form of basing the Christian belief in this real and literal hell on pre-Christian Jewish ideas of the

[63] Mark Driscoll, "Heaven and Hell," March 27, 2011. http://www.marshill.com.
[64] Hank Hanegraaf and Lee Strobel, January 31, 2013. http://www.equip.org.

afterlife. Most, if not all, of the previous authors and speakers have done this by either reinterpreting the historical record or specific Biblical passages (such as the ones that deal with *Sheol*,) as has Dr. Desmond Alexander, professor and theologian. He argues that while the Jewish idea of life after death changed and evolved over time, there was one continual stream through Jewish thought that would make this dichotomy of eternal destiny not only probable, but likely. Alexander writes in his conclusion:

> While some of the evidence is ambiguous, and questions remain to be answered, we are perhaps now in a position to clarify certain fundamental issues regarding the Old Testament perception of the after-life. Firstly, we may reject the currently popular belief that in the pre-Exilic period death was viewed by the Hebrews as a natural legacy of man's mortality and that, as a consequence, little interest was shown in the after-life. Secondly, it seems probably that the term *Sheol* frequently, if not always, designated the nether world, and that as such it represented the continuing abode of the ungodly. Thirdly, whereas the wicked were thought to remain in the dark, silent region of *Sheol*, the righteous live in the hope that God would deliver them from the power of death and take them to himself.[65]

As Evangelicals understand the Bible as a continual narrative, a story that runs from the beginning of Genesis to the prophetic end of Revelation, pre-Christian Jewish thought about the afterlife and hell becomes extremely important. Jewish theology undoubtedly informed early Christian teachings and understandings, and as Evangelicals today attempt to place themselves in a direct line to the early church, it becomes imperative to have a firm grasp on what previous Jewish teaching was, and what Judaism looked like at the time of Christ because of this Jewish influence.

Because the complete inerrancy of the Bible is so important, and arguably indispensable to the Evangelical faith, the idea that the Bible could present opposing viewpoints on any subject—like this subject of hell—is, to say the least, problematic. Any shade of alternative viewpoints on the afterlife besides this dichotomy of heaven or hell based on faith alone needs to

[65] Desmond Alexander, "The Old Testament view of life after death," *Themelios* 11, Issue 2 (January 1986): 41-46, 45.

be dealt with in order to keep the argument consistent. Mark Galli, the author of God Wins, does this throughout the whole of his book. To the question of why hell is not presented in the Old Testament as succinctly and often as it is in the New, Galli writes:

> The Hebrew writers were God's prophets, who were by definition God's mouthpieces. They spoke and wrote down only the messages God wanted to send to his people at that time and in that place. God revealed most of the details we know about hell later, in the New Testament period. It's God's prerogative to reveal what he wants us to know—and when. It's also true that the New Testament doesn't talk in detail about hell, but through Jesus' words and other New Testament writers, God reveals enough about it to suggest that it is something we should indeed be concerned with. So what's important is how we will respond to what God has revealed to us in his Word—not when it was revealed or how many details we have about it.[66]

Chan and Sprinkle reiterate Galli's claims:

> Jews in the first century used the Old Testament to build their theology. But the Old Testament doesn't say much about hell. The doctrine of hell is progressively developed throughout Scripture, much like heaven, the Holy Spirit, and even Jesus. This definitely does *not* mean that these things changed over time; God simply reveals more and more about them as Scripture unfolds….It's not until the New Testament that these ideas [about hell] are fully revealed.[67]

Chan and Sprinkle go on to describe the first century Jewish ideas on hell, using the Bible and apocryphal texts to make their case that it was not just that Jews differed on opinion on hell, but that *the doctrine of hell was in flux, moving toward the current Evangelical belief,* adding that "so ingrained was the belief in hell among first-century Jews that Jesus would have had to go out of His way to distance Himself from these beliefs if He didn't hold them."[68] The argument is not that hell *changed*, but rather that God revealed his will over time, and that any Biblical contradictions on the doctrine of hell has been the plan all along. As this allowance for malleable doctrine helps solidify the belief in the Bible as a continuous story and sets Evangelicalism in line with a longer tradition, it also becomes problematic in that it looks more like one based on

[66] Galli, 102-3.
[67] Chan and Sprinkle, 50-1.
[68] Ibid, 49.

continual revelation rather than firm and strict doctrine, and warrants later investigation on the arguments from God's will and intentions.

To sum up, the current Evangelical arguments for hell revolve around a variety of themes: mainly arguments from the historical record, exegetical readings of specific Biblical passages, and an appeal to feelings of tradition by various methods. In the following section, I will argue that while these arguments may not be completely false, they do lack historical nuance, and are being made for very specific purposes.

A Historical Survey of Hell

As I have previously mentioned, my intent for this paper has never been to write the complete history of hell. It is too large of a project, and others have already attempted such a project. Rather, what interests me are the reasons that these Evangelicals have claimed and used the history of the doctrine of hell for their own purposes—mainly to create the paradigm of "us" versus "them" by using the doctrine of hell as a theological boundary that separates the saved from the non-believer doomed to hell. To fully understand the complexity of their arguments, it becomes necessary to have—at the very least—an idea of what the history of hell entails. Therefore, I will present a brief survey of hell's history, along with an interpretation of the Evangelical appropriation of this history, in order to focus on Bruce Lincoln's idea that "Groups constituted as 'us' are nowhere near so monolithic in actuality as ideology and rhetoric would have it."[69]

First century Jewish thought on the afterlife was far from a cohesive set of beliefs, much like everything else in antiquity (and arguably, today.) Flavius Josephus chronicles some of the different reasons for postmortem rewards and punishments between the Pharisees and the Sadducees in his *Wars of the Jews* and *Antiquities of the Jews*. By reading these texts, it becomes obvious that these two groups believed a soul would go to what could be considered hell for completely different reasons, and that the focus of pre-Christian Jewish belief in the afterlife was never "just" about personal faith.[70] About these differences, Henry Chadwick writes "Judaism was not monolithic. There were differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees that could become sharp."[71] The afterlife, or heaven and hell, was one of them.

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[69] Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 34.
[70] Flavius Josephus, translated by William Whiston, 1895. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu.
[71] Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 13.

Evangelicals seem intent on aligning their beliefs with the historical record, attempting to claim that they maintain this "true" Christianity as believed by the early followers of Jesus. By understanding the importance of this Evangelical claim, we can begin to see what Chan and Sprinkle mean when they write, "We need to enter Jesus' world because Jesus was a Jew…The only way we're going to understand what Jesus said about hell is to soak ourselves in the Bible's own culture."[72] However, the problem becomes apparent when we realize that because they are right—Jesus and his early followers were Jews, and were undeniably influenced by Jewish thought and doctrine—early Christianity would have necessarily inherited this incredible diversity that Judaism was known for by. As Alan E. Bernstein writes, "No correct understanding of hell is possible, therefore, without taking into account the conceptual background of the ancient world prior to Christianity."[73] As he continues:

> To be sure, a religious community defines itself to a large extent by selecting its canonical literature. Yet all populations are divided by differing tendencies and preferences, sensibilities and concerns. Thus whereas a large fraction lives on the central plateau of consensus, it is not always a majority, and many minority groups live on the slopes of partial agreement or at the fringes of dissent toward various extremes. This variety was certainly characteristic of ancient Judaism, where the religious community was also a political one that was divided, scattered, and partially regrouped. The texts that both reflect and define the community that produced and reveres them will also reflect this diversity. For these reasons we cannot speak of one biblical tradition or characterize Judaism by any one quotation.[74]

Any kinds of problems or doctrinal debates would not have simply disappeared once Jesus entered the scene, and new issues continuously became apparent as Christianity grew. It is an outright mistake to argue that Judaism represented any kind of monolithic set of beliefs where every issue of doctrine was completely hammered out that seamlessly evolved into Christianity.

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[72] Chan and Sprinkle, 49.
[73] Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 2.
[74] Ibid, 176.

The idea of hell was no different, being one of these issues that varied among individuals and different groups of believers.

The issue of Origen and his "heretical" Universalist views present a different problem for Evangelicals, and one that must also be dealt with. It is not sufficient to say that "no one" held alternative views of hell, as Origen was excommunicated and declared a heretic partially over his Universalist claims. However, the lack of a nuanced understanding of not only Origen's theology but the reasons for his subsequent expulsion is startling, and needs to be addressed. Origen's theology is not completely linear or altogether clear, especially looking back at it 1,500 years later. There are many more details to his ideas on heaven and hell than is typically thought and are presented by the authors mentioned previously. Origen was not "just" a Universalist, in the same way that no one is "just" anything. As Mark S. M. Scott points out in his article "Guarding the Mysteries of Salvation: The Pastoral Pedagogy of Origen's Universalism," Origen's theology and Universalist doctrine was far more complicated than a simplistic understanding of his teaching allows.[75] But by presenting him in the way that we have seen, it becomes easy to disregard Origen completely, pigeon-holing him into this category of a marginal heretic who was expunged from the historical canon of Christianity. Also, Origen presents a larger problem for the Evangelical's view of history, one that was not addressed in the texts I have outlined previously. According to Henry Chadwick, Origen died around the year 254 CE.[76] While Origen was excommunicated in 453 CE and was declared heretical in 553 CE by the Councils of Constantinople, the construction of the argument that Origen either doesn't matter because of his subsequent judgment of heresy or that he was a complete outlier in the purview of Christian

[75] Mark S.M. Scott, "Guarding the Mysteries of Salvation: The Pastoral Pedagogy of Origen's Universalism," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18:3 (2010): 347-368.
[76] Chadwick, 110.

history belies the nuanced facts of his scope of influence.[77] The *very fact* that we know of Origen and these issues of Universalism in the early church, and that Evangelicals are presently debating his ideas helps prove just how influential and important Origen really was to Christianity. It would be impossible to completely remove Origen and his theology from early Christianity, or to successfully argue that he was only an outlier, completely on the fringes of "Orthodox" Christianity. It is clear that his influence was wide and long-lasting. Finally, regarding Origen, as we understand this belief in heaven versus hell as a theoretical model used to highlight the relationships between Evangelicals and non-believers, it could be argued that on some level, Evangelicals *need* a singular figure like Origen to have a negative reference by which to construct themselves. This is possibly one of the reasons Origen comes up so often in Evangelical arguments for the existence of hell. Even if Origen was a complete and utter heretic, *which he was not,* without him there could be no heresy in which to rally against and guard the doctrines of Orthodoxy. This makes Origen, again, a pivotal and arguably necessary figure in the history of Christianity.

Besides Origen, there were a small group of theologians and early church leaders arguing for a different view of life after death, chief among them Gregory of Nyssa. He and his counterparts who also questioned the reality of hell as being for the non-believer help prove that the issue of hell was obviously not static, but rather was continuously up for debate—just like everything else is in its infancy. Christianity began as and continues to be a religion of with rich variety, and it is this variety that modern Evangelicals live in that makes it so difficult to accept an argument of a static and uncontested history of hell so difficult to accept.

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[77] Fordham University, "Medieval Sourcebook:
Fifth Ecumenical Council: Constantinople II, 553," last modified 2013,
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/const2.asp.

Regarding early Christianity and its history, it is also extremely important to remember not only the doctrinal context that early church fathers were living in, but also the cultural contexts where any kind of theology—on hell or otherwise—emerged. Alan E. Bernstein in his pivotal work on the formation of hell makes a very important point in regards to this:

> The study of 'background' is complicated, however, by an important factor. The authors of the sources we perceive as background did not foresee the development of the concept of hell. When they addressed the subjects that interest us, they were in fact discussing other matters, however intimately related we feel these may be to the concept that eventually emerged. Their thoughts found expression only in the midst of related ideas that are far more universal: beliefs about death, the dead, the soul, justice, and retribution. To say that this background 'anticipated' or 'prepared' the concept of hell would be to attribute to these authors a goal they did not have.[78]

Therefore, the Evangelical arguments that the doctrine of hell was the same then as it is today, or that the Old Testament was specifically written purposefully as ongoing revelation in regards to the particular doctrine of hell is misleading. The feelings about life, death, heaven and hell were all very different in the context of the first century than they are today, and it would be irresponsible to assume otherwise.

The importance of contextualizing the historical Christian doctrine of hell continues to be apparent when seeing just how these Evangelicals are appropriating the rest of history in order to create this linear narrative. While understandably done for specific reasons, using words and phrases like "traditionally," "almost all Christian theologians," "theological mainstream," "the predominant view" and arguments such as "even fewer were universalists," "Origen as the only theologian to teach universalism," and "advocates for an alternative idea of hell were always in the minority," completely disregards and obscures the vast amount of variation that was present throughout the whole of Christian history.

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[78] Bernstein, 2.

Important Christian figures such as Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Billy Graham all wrote or preached on the doctrine of hell in some way or another. They all had their own reasons for highlighting specific details about their belief, which were all products of the culture and the age they found themselves in. Martin Luther, for example, needed to emphasize that dividing line between Catholicism and his new brand of Christianity. Any mention of hell by Martin Luther, then, needs to take into account this point, and cannot be treated as if his reasons for his belief would have been the same then as they are today. Jonathan Edwards, author of the most memorable and recognizable sermon on hell focused on personal sin and piety in a time where the need to control behavior through the church was at its highest. Personal behavior did not only affect the individual in the type of communal arrangement these early settlers found themselves in; there were very real consequences to people for actions that would be considered sinful. Therefore, it became imperative to use the threat of hell as something other than the tool of evangelism as it is used today; rather it was a motivator for right faith and right action.

In the twentieth century, Harry Emerson Fosdick, the liberal Protestant known for his "Shall the Fundamentalists Win" that challenged popular American conservative politics, is an example of not only how fluid the doctrine of hell was as he outright denied the doctrine, but how obviously changeable and variable Christianity on the whole has always been. In a time where American Christians were scrambling to defend their faith from attacks of evolutionary theory and higher criticism, Fosdick and others leaned in to the issues, arguing that Christianity was big enough to be able to make room for these new ideas.[79] While I will not argue that Fosdick (nor Luther or Edwards, for that matter) would be an "Evangelical," the point here is that there has never, nor could there ever be, a straightforward and completely linear

[79] Sweeney, 167.

understanding of Christian history. It is not my argument to make, but I sincerely doubt that humanity on the whole has ever worked in such a fashion.

Finally, Billy Graham presents a counterpart to not only this "traditional" paradigm of the history of hell, but even these Evangelical authors and pastors themselves. Arguably the most influential minister and public Christian in American history, Graham has tackled every doctrinal issue under the sun—including heaven and hell. But what is so interesting about Graham and his work is that his focus is on the hope of heaven, rather than the damnation of hell. Just by listening to a small handful of Graham's sermons from the 1950s-70s, it is apparent that he is not overly concerned with hell, and saving a soul from hell does not seem to be his ultimate goal. Rather, he is concerned with the quality of life issues and the promise of safety in eternity if his audiences would accept Christ. For Graham, the emphasis is on the *saving to*, not the *saving from*.[80]

The reason for Graham's rhetoric becomes obvious once he is placed in the context of his time. The Cold War and the continual threat of Communism were real everyday threats for Americans—Christian and non-Christian alike. The culture was rapidly changing, and at a pace many people were not ready for. Religion on the whole was arguably changed, and Christianity and Evangelicalism were not immune to these cultural shifts. As Stephen J. Whitfield, author of The Culture of the Cold War writes:

> Certainly, his influence was to outlast the Cold War, and he probably remained the most consistently and deeply admired American of his time. But Graham's rise to prominence is unintelligible outside of the milieu of dread and anxiety in which he emerged. A preacher became more publicized than any American other than the president because of the message that he delivered—mixing the fear of Armageddon with the assurance of redemption. The concerns that he addressed, perhaps more than the solution that he

[80] While not explicit, I gained much of my knowledge about Graham from his online archive, accessed at http://www.billygraham.org/videoarchive.asp.

> provided, made Graham a phenomenon who seemed uncommonly attuned to the *Zeitgeist*.[81]

Therefore, it is safe to say that a more complete understanding of Graham's hell does not only rest on this common Evangelical relationship of believer versus non-believer. Rather, it is the idea that, yes, while hell exists in the life to come, it can also be found here on Earth. Graham focuses his message not on saving someone from hell, but giving peace and comfort in a troubled time.

As I have argued, it takes a nuanced and detailed view of history in order to sufficiently understand the Evangelical problem of hell. History is not just a matter of the past, it is a subject that many have used, manipulated, and obfuscated in order to present one side of a particular issue. We see this tactic often being used by historical revisionists in an attempt to downplay the importance of the separation of church and state to the Constitutional Framers, hagiographies of revered individuals both religious and secular, and any number of other issues where the stakes and emotional investments are high. The Evangelical problem of hell is no different, nor should it be. While I do not want to be caught up in the act of pointing fingers at Evangelicals who get their history wrong for any number of reasons, I still argue that a more nuanced and careful view of history makes for more complete and interesting understandings of belief, intentions, history, and ultimately Evangelicalism.

[81] Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 78.

Reading is Interpretation

As I have previously written, many of the arguments over hell based on Biblical interpretation is precisely that—interpretation. The reader takes the text into their own personal situation, where no two are exactly the same, using what they have previously known and have been exposed to in order to make sense of what they are reading. Dorothy Smith's standpoint theory makes it clear that at the end of the day, everything we say or do is based on a particular standpoint—where we are situated and what stakes we have in the discussion. For such an important text, the Bible—being around 2,000 years old in one form or another—may be one of the most interpreted, and problematic, texts in history. Its power to shape lives through interpreting its words and meanings is undeniable.

Until the Bible was readily available to everyday lay people around the nineteenth century, it was relatively uncommon for individual believers to voice or argue for any dissenting theological understanding of the Bible. Theological hermeneutics and exegesis was best left for high clergy members, who in turn instructed their congregations on what to believe. Personal relationships between individual believers and Scripture were few and far between, as the reasons for the Protestant Reformation quickly show us. As Candy Gunther Brown writes in her work on Evangelical print culture, by claiming their religion to be faith in Christ alone as revealed in the Bible, "Protestants affirmed that they belonged to a priesthood that included all Christian believers."[82] As the Bible began to be interpreted on its own by individuals, Biblical interpretation became much more of a problem, leaving a wider space for competing doctrines to surface. With that being said, it is important to add a caveat here. There is plenty of evidence to

[82] Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2-3.

support the fact that personal exegesis was done in earlier centuries. Many in monastic communities spent a majority of their lives studying and contemplating Scripture, and some everyday lay people felt the desire or need to read the Bible for personal and spiritual fulfillment. However, it is this paradigm shift on the matter of *scale* I take issue with.

Most Americans—Christian or not—own a Bible. Or if they do not, at least can access one relatively quickly, and have the physical and mental capacity to read it. There is no shortage of varieties of translation; it is not uncommon for the Evangelical to have multiple versions of the Bible in their homes, doing different studies in different translations at the same time. There are Bibles marketed to each and every subcategory imaginable, from the bride,[83] the hunter,[84] to even the Bible specifically edited to delete what could be interpreted as homophobic passages,[85] along with e-Bibles, iPhone apps, software downloads, and a version read by actor James Earl Jones.[86] The very fact that these Bibles exist, that there is such a proliferation of Scripture in our everyday lives, blunts the Evangelical claim that hell has been largely uncontested and static from the beginning of Christian history because *the issue could not have been one on this scale before.*

As I've said before, while my work is not meant as an exhaustive historical report on the shifting understanding of the doctrine of a real and literal hell as a matter of scale, it is important to problematize the claims that the questioning of hell is modern and new solely because no one ever attempted such a feat before. This argument leaves out the fact that the question of hell may in fact be modern due to historical reality. The way Evangelicals approach and read the Bible for

[83] http://www.lifeway.com/Product/brides-bible-kjv-P005525292
[84] http://www.amazon.com/Sportsmans-Bible-Camoflauge-Bonded-Leather/dp/1586403222/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1365214507&sr=1-1&keywords=hunter+bible
[85] http://www.amazon.com/The-Queen-James-Bible/dp/0615724531/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1365214417&sr=8-1&keywords=queen+james+bible
[86] http://www.amazon.com/James-Earl-Jones-Reads-Bible/dp/1591502241

themselves today is not the way it has been done in the past. This argument leaves no room for a historical understanding of cultural shifts in regards to exegesis or dissemination of religious discourse, as not only the availability of the Bible was changing, but the very way it was being read was up for grabs. Kathryn Tanner, in her work on theology and culture, argues that because the anthropological understanding of culture has changed for both the academic and lay person, so has the way in which theology is done and is understood. No longer is theology relegated to the priest or academic theologian, where issues of doctrine are dealt with by a select few. Rather, theology is made and maintained as an integral part of Christian culture.[87] What the Evangelical argument of hell is missing is this underlying understanding that the way in which theology is *done* has fundamentally changed. Every believer for themselves has the opportunity—and even the veritable *duty*—to read and interpret the Bible. But these problems, such as this one in regards to the doctrine of hell, pop up more frequently and make more noise throughout Evangelical culture because of these overarching changes that Tanner describes in her work.

It is no surprise that since Biblical interpretation is so important to this argument of hell that the rhetoric quickly devolves into a matter of competing agendas. There is no way around seeing the arguments as being set up in the style of "he said/she said," which provides its own set of problems in regards to interpretation. Who has more authority to tackle these questions, what or who is to be trusted, and how a believer knows what is true or false is constantly being discussed and debated, especially among those who disagree. This is a hallmark of Evangelicalism, these differences between power and authority provides much of its differences and variation. But it cannot be denied that much of these arguments lie in utterly dismissing dissenters, while clinging to the claim that was created in the exact same style as the other—by reading and interpreting Scripture.

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[87] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minnesota: Ausburg Fortress, 1997), 61-71.

So often does the claim of valid Biblical exegesis appear among Evangelicals that it becomes expected and at times even seems redundant. In Mark Driscoll's sermons, he commonly refers to this idea, saying "I'm just telling you what the Bible says," unproblematically with his own sense of reliable authority. In one sermon, he sates "It is not that I'm right, but it is that the Bible is true. Jesus is not a liar."[88] Similarly, in Campus Crusade for Christ's "Statement of Faith" it reads:

> The sole basis of our beliefs is the Bible, God's infallible written Word, the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. We believe that it was uniquely, verbally, and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit and that it was written without error (inerrant) in the original manuscripts. It is the supreme and final authority in all matters on which it speaks…Because of the specialized calling of our movement, we desire to allow for freedom of conviction on other doctrinal matters, *provided that any interpretation is based upon the Bible alone, and that no such interpretation shall become an issue which hinders the ministry to which God has called us.* (Italics my own.)[89]

While not historically useful, the argument of "this is what the Bible says" cannot be taken lightly, as it plays such a significant part to the way Evangelical theology is constructed. In almost every defense on the reality of hell comes a methodical and careful Biblical argument for the existence of a real and literal hell, where verses are chosen with precision as to which to highlight and which to ignore. In Robert A. Peterson's Hell on Trial: the Case for Eternal Punishment, Peterson spends over half of his time arguing for this idea of hell based on a "correct" understanding of the Bible. In his index of Scripture, he cites over 550 individual verses—in a 258 page book.[90] The Bible, then, is used as one of the major defenders of the idea of hell. To question hell is to question the Bible, which is paramount to questioning God himself. Peterson even makes the argument that based on one passage alone (Revelation 14:9-11), his

[88] Driscoll sermon.
[89] Campus Crusade for Christ, Statement of Faith.
[90] Peterson.

specific idea of hell is Biblical and correct.[91] He goes on to say that "it is dangerous to resort to various maneuvers to avoid aspects of the Bible's teaching that we don't like. A far better course is to submit to the teaching of Scripture, even when that teaching offends us."[92] The arguments as presented, because they bear the weight of the Bible, are to be accepted as truth, regardless of their historical reality.

This problem of interpretation is, in some ways, endemic not only to Evangelicalism, but Protestant Christianity. In his review of Rob Bell's Love Wins, Thomas S. Kidd points out the problem by writing,

> *Love Wins* illustrates the weakest aspect of Protestantism—and especially evangelical—theology, which is the lack of a controlling authority to adjudicate the meaning of scripture. (Catholics have their own theological problems, but at least they know who makes the call in theological disputes!) So what if almost all Christians everywhere have agreed on the reality of hell? Rob Bell knows God, he reads his Bible, and he gets to choose. This is Do-It-Yourself Doctrine.[93]

However ironic Kidd's statements may be to the academic looking at the "big picture" of the problems associated with this kind of self-made theology, it should go without saying that Kidd is *doing the exact same thing* as Bell does in his book—claiming his own interpretation of Scripture is correct, and relying on his own thoughts about God and the Bible for a feeling as a source of authority. And Kidd is correct; this may be a weak point of Evangelicalism. Randall Balmer also makes this argument, writing "Because the Bible, a wonderfully complex book, admits so many interpretations, however, evangelicals—and Protestants generally—have used the doctrine of *sola scriptura* as their warrant to run in many theological directions, unchecked by the restraints of tradition."[94] These are precisely some of the reasons that this issue of hell is

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[91] Ibid, 88.
[92] Ibid, 89.
[93] Kidd.
[94] Balmer, 539-40.

so problematic for Evangelicals. With each individual believer doing the same thing they attack the other for, a larger question emerges: Who wins in the debate over authority, and why? It's obviously not just an issue over historical reliability, but one associated with the issues over identity politics—which I will address in the next section.

Identity Creation

In an interview posted on May 23, 2011, Anglican bishop and New Testament scholar N.T. Wright responded to the question of hell and Rob Bell's Love Wins in this way:

> My usual counter-question is 'Why are Americans so fixated on hell?' Far more Americans ask me about hell than ever happens in my own country, and I really want to know—Why is it [that] the most prosperous, affluent nation on earth is really determined to be sure that the know precisely who is going to be frying in hell, and what the temperature will be, and so on…So many people, as I say, particularly in American culture, they really want to know the last, fine-tuned details of hell. And it seems to be a part of their faith, often a central part of their faith, that a certain number of people are simply going to go to hell, and we know who these people are.[95]

Here, Wright touches on something that has become glaringly obvious in the wake of the debates surrounding Bell's book, the arguments over the historical record, and the Evangelical belief in hell. In this section, I will argue that this oppositional relationship of heaven versus hell is not only a construct to understand the "other" that is the non-believer, but is such a central part of the Evangelical identity that by questioning this one theological tenet, that identity begins to waver, leading to problems such as the debate over Rob Bell. Wright is correct, hell is important, and cannot easily be removed. But the question then becomes *why*? Why is it that hell is so important to the Evangelical that it cannot be excised without issue?

In Identity, Religion, and Values, sociologist C. Margaret Hall writes that "identity may be best understood as a result of value choices and ultimate realities and definitions of the universe."[96] Identities, both group and personal, are formed in regards to what is held important, or in this case, sacred. A religious identity is formed by internalizing certain "truths" about the

[95] N.T. Wright.
[96] C. Margaret Hall, *Identity, Religion, and Values: Implications for Practitioners*. (Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis, 1996,) 5.

ways in which the world works, such as the Evangelical belief that Christians will go to heaven and non-Christians will go to hell.

This is a foundational belief for the Evangelical, something that serves as a resource for the motivated construction of identity. [97] In Bruce Lincoln's Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11, he writes:

> Cultural identity and belonging are not simply ascribed or inherited by birth; they also—and more importantly—emerge from processes in which people are slowly educated by those around them to make judgments the group considers appropriate about a great host of things and to make metajudgments about the relative value of their own and others' judgment. These judgments and metajudgments are made in many domains; to the extent that standards in these domains cohere and are shared by members of the group, we may speak of cultural integration.[98]

Evangelicals have created this relationship between heaven versus hell based on faith in Christ not only as a religious doctrine, but as a way to construct and control their personal and group identities as Evangelicals. The idea that the doctrine is foundational to Christianity, has always been there, and can never be removed is so important to this constructed identity that when a once popular pastor and "one of their own" like Rob Bell comes along and outwardly denies this important doctrine, that constructed identity is challenged with varying results. Either the dissenter becomes regarded as someone other and not a "real" Christian—because a "real" Christian cannot have these contradictory beliefs—or else the entire definition of what makes a Christian a "Christian" is begins to fall. And likewise, because the history of hell needs to be succinctly wrapped up as foundational Christian doctrine, the argument that hell has always been largely and popularly uncontested serves in an effort to preserve that identity.

Again, Bruce Lincoln writes "Ultimately, that which either holds society together or takes it apart is sentiment, and the chief instrument with which sentiment may be aroused,

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[97] Gary Urton, *The History of a Myth: Pacariqtambo and the Origen of the Inkas* (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1990), 9.
[98] Lincoln, 51-2.

manipulated, and rendered dormant is discourse." [99] What Lincoln is describing here is not only a theoretical model in which to understand *religion* per se, but can be used to more completely understand what is happening to the Evangelical identity when hell is questioned. As the "society" I am investigating is the Evangelical movement, the "sentiment" Lincoln speaks of is feelings of religiosity, specifically the doctrinal constraints of the dialectical relationship between heaven and hell. What challenges the Evangelical's identity then, is the discourse of overtly questioning hell, or rendering it inconsequential or historically inaccurate—which, for example, Bell has done with the publication of his book. Which is to say, by questioning this established belief in hell, Bell blurred what makes an Evangelical "an Evangelical," challenging this created identity for those who wondered whether Bell was still of the "Same" as an Evangelical, or had crossed into the "Other" by writing Love Wins, ad what that meant for their own personal faith and understanding of the world.

To completely understand what this means for the Evangelical identity we need to see the importance of the doctrine of hell in the first place. It is one thing to say that hell is important, but it is another to understand why. In Hell: The Logic of Damnation, the Evangelical Jerry L. Walls writes "A little reflection reveals, however, that the doctrine of hell is closer to the heart of traditional Christian belief than we may initially think. This is most evident when we recall that Christianity is primarily a scheme of salvation. Its main thrust is a message of how we can be saved from our sins and receive eternal life…But if hell is not perceived to be a serious threat, it is hard to see how salvation can have the same meaning it used to."[100] Because heaven is partially formed by the existence of hell, to some, the denial of hell may very well become the denial of heaven. If heaven is the ultimate goal, or if Christianity really is "a scheme of

[99] Ibid, 11.
[100] Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 6-7

salvation," then why bother? Why continue in a faith that requires so much and may offer so little in this life if there's nothing to look forward to? With this in mind, it seems obvious that hell is important in order to maintain this relationship between heaven and hell, and the absolute and fundamental Evangelical promise of heaven.

Ingrained in this argument is the belief that Christianity, as presented by Evangelicals, *is the only way* to be saved, and faith is absolutely necessary for entry into heaven. If hell does not exist, and everyone goes to heaven, then it remains that there would be no reason to have faith in Christ, and therefore no reason to evangelize and spread the good news. Again, in his review of Love Wins, Kevin DeYoung writes, "It's as if Bell wants every earthly father to love every child in the world the exact same way. If you rob a father of his unique, specific, not-for-everyone love, you rob the children of their greatest treasure."[101] As one of the primary markers of identity, the ability to delineate between one another is extremely important. In the Evangelical worldview, it is God who has made the rules and ultimately gets to decide who is in and who is out. Because an Evangelical has "chosen" Christ and will go to heaven based on this decision, anyone who doesn't is out. Challenging this then becomes challenging a believer's ultimate destiny, presenting the very real possibility that the Evangelical identity as saved could fall apart. Also, if a person *must* believe in the doctrine of hell to be a saved Evangelical Christian, then what happens when someone rejects hell? Since there is such a strong emphasis on spreading the message of Christ in order to save souls, to reject hell—thereby rejecting Christianity—sends the believer to hell. The impact would be devastating to the Evangelical. Without this indispensable doctrine, how else could one be certain that they are not responsible for someone's eternal destiny in hell? One of the goals of the Evangelical is to spread the gospel, making disciples for

[101] DeYoung, 16.

Christ. Michael E. Wittmer describes the possibility as being "fatal."[102] To know that some may be questioning hell, thereby questioning traditional Christianity, means that they would be spreading a false doctrine, and this would be tragic.

It should go without saying that the many roles of Jesus in Evangelical Christianity can never be over emphasized. As these Evangelicals believe, without Jesus, everyone deserves and goes to hell. To deny hell is to deny Christ's role in Christianity and the world. It is safe to say that there could be no Evangelicalism, or even Christianity, without the singular person of Jesus and the belief that there is a *need* for Jesus to have died on the cross for the sins of mankind. How Christ's death and resurrection redeemed believers from the wrath of God is at the center of Evangelicalism, and denying his role as necessary and only savior denigrates Christ's death, questioning its entire meaning. It could also be argued that the entirety of Evangelical culture has revolved around this need to accept Christ as personal savior for decades. For someone who has constructed their faith and their identities based around Christ, allowing for a worldview in which hell does not exist, negates the need for Jesus as Messiah. Possibly most telling is Michael E. Wittmer's assertion that

> Third, both religious pluralism and anonymous Christianity cheapen the costly sacrifice of Christ. As Augustine wrote in *On Nature and Grace*, if anyone can be saved by embracing the good in nature, then 'Christ has died in vain' (Augustine 2011, p. 320). It's well and good for Christians to reach out to those who feel excluded and let them know that they are loved and embraced by God. However, if we tell those on the margins that their religion may possess sufficient grace to save them, then we are essentially pushing Jesus to the margins in order to reach them. We may think that it's *nice* that Jesus died on the cross for us, but we can no longer say why it's *necessary*. If Jesus' death and resurrection are nothing more than a symbol of God's universal love—a sign that everything is good and right with the world—then there really is no need to proclaim the good news that Jesus is the Christ who offers eternal life to those who believe specifically in him.[103]

[102] Wittmer, 109.
[103] Wittmer, 120.

Jesus's death was awful. It is graphically detailed in the New Testament gospels, and is clung to as not only necessary, but as something humanity has done to Christ himself. If there was no hell, then there would have been no real reason for Jesus to die. The death of Jesus—of God—must continue to mean something incredibly important, for if it doesn't, then his death was in vain.

Apart from theological minutia, there is yet another facet of the Evangelical identity that is indispensable and cannot be overlooked. As both Bruce Lincoln and Craig R. Prentiss argue, neither personal nor group identities are created in a vacuum.[104] Prentiss writes "human beings are constantly engaged in making sense of their world in the context of their social environment….to a great extent, our self-identities, our values, and our manner of giving meaning to experiences are developed in relationship to others."[105] As a movement so deeply invested in relational community, Evangelicalism is no stranger to both the benefits and the perils that come with complex interpersonal relationships. The Evangelical identity helps to bind people together in order to not only meet a common goal, but to develop the constraints and limitations that identity formation requires. This doctrine of hell is only one of these limitations of the Evangelical identity, and that limitation is challenged on a larger and more substantive scale when hell is questioned.

It may seem difficult, especially to the non-Evangelical, to understand why the belief in hell is so vital to the creation and maintenance of identity. But as I have argued in this section, hell is important. There are consequences that must be dealt with if someone refutes the belief. Whether they can be dealt with successfully, or whether the identity of Evangelical ultimately

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[104] Bruce Lincoln, "Culture," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. by Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (New York: Continuum, 2009).
[105] Craig R. Prentiss, "Introduction," in *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction*, ed. by Craig R. Prentiss (New York: New York University, 2003), 1-2.

collapses is something best left to theologians and Evangelicals themselves. It is not my intent to declare a winner or loser in the debate over whether hell is "Orthodox" or not. Rather, what is important is the veritable "fall out" from questioning the doctrine of hell. Social scientists and psychologists interested in the mechanics of the mind refer to what we've seen here as "cognitive dissonance," the idea that when two contradictory beliefs are held in tandem, the one that is easier to deal with emotionally is the belief that wins, regardless of the outward logic. However, what is most interesting to me, and what I have brought to light in regards to Evangelicalism, hell and identity is what Bruce Lincoln means when he writes:

> When previously persuasive discourses no longer persuade and previously prevalent sentiments no longer prevail, society enters a situation of fluidity and crisis. In such moments competing groups continue to deploy strategic discourses and may also make use of coercive force as they struggle, not just to seize or retain power, but to reshape the borders and hierarchic order of society itself.[106]

This "crisis" as Lincoln describes it makes perfect sense in the context of the debates over hell. Since Evangelicals believe the only "true" marker of being a Christian, a person bound for heaven and saved from the perils of hell through Jesus Christ's atoning death on the cross, is by having a specific conversion experience, what can they make of people who aren't born again? Asking questions, like Rob Bell continues to do in his work, or outright denying the existence thereof create possible "slippery slopes" for many Evangelicals, and can lead believers into an abyss of doubt they would not willingly want to enter. There are many consequences to the denial of hell, and real power aligned with the doctrine. The denial of hell has the ability to disrupt and dismantle created identities, and create what Lincoln calls "a situation of fluidity and crisis" for these specific Evangelical identities. Yet, there is also more at stake in the discussion of hell than just created identities alone. As I continue into the next section, I will look at how

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[106] Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 174.

the borders of Evangelicalism are being contested and strained by this debate, and why these borders—real or otherwise—are so important to Evangelicalism.

Boundary Formation

As a religious movement so fluid in its construction, Evangelicalism must constantly create and reevaluate the boundaries which define it. This is no small feat, and requires more than just declaring that someone is not an Evangelical—especially when the person in question is self-identifying as one. Rather, formation and maintenance of boundaries necessitate complex social, cultural, and religious discourse to make those clear borders in which to define one as an Evangelical, and another as simply not as a *true* or *real* Christian. One way Evangelicals have been creating and managing their boundaries is by using the doctrine of hell as a veritable litmus test. This is specifically what I will explore here as I finish my study on the Evangelical doctrine of hell and how it is being used in modern American Evangelicalism.

Regarding the history of hell, it is telling that the doctrine has not been such an important part of "Orthodox" Christianity (if there ever was "Orthodoxy" in regards to hell) until recently. As previously argued, hell was not as fundamental to previous Evangelicals as it has become today. And if there ever was a time where hell was an issue, there were real cultural and social reasons for its emphasis. The logical question that invariably follows is "Why now?" Is there something new and different about today's Evangelicalism, or as I will argue, are the debates over hell a symptom of some of the problems the Evangelical movement has always had to deal with? Jon R. Stone, in his study of the boundary markers of American Evangelicalism, argues that these kinds of debates and changing definitions of what it means to be an Evangelical are inherent to the movement, and that "evangelicals themselves are deeply divided over who they are and even over what constitutes evangelicalism."[107] Because there has never been a formal

[107] Jon R. Stone, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism: The Postwar Evangelical Coalition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 3.

Evangelical denomination with strict regulatory apparatuses, believers have been responsible for adjudicating ideological boundaries for themselves. What we see today is really nothing new—it is just one more example of believers creating and maintaining the boundaries of Evangelicalism. For example, as these kinds of debates are not completely unique, this kind of rhetoric can easily be seen in the early twentieth century debates over liberalism and conservatism. The ultimate goal then was never *only* about politics and political power, rather the arguments also revolved around whether a Christian could remain one while either being a liberal or a conservative, depending on whose agenda was being promoted. This trend in the political arena continues, as do the larger attempts to define and maintain the boundaries of Evangelicalism.

There are different reasons for hell to be such an important part of Evangelical theology, which I have addressed previously. Yet, even besides being important factors for the creation of identities, these issues continue to matter in boundary formation. To an Evangelical, questioning this belief in a real and literal hell can denigrate Christ, refute the "correct" interpretations of the Bible, give a wider berth to the issue and role of sin in personal lives, and question the historical story of Christianity. Even if the Evangelical argument about these issues is flawed, it does not ultimately matter to those who have constructed their own definitions and boundaries of Evangelicalism by deploying the doctrine of hell as a specific defining category.

It is important to note the fact that not all Evangelicals use the doctrine of hell as this defining marker of Evangelicalism. In the review of Rob Bell's Love Wins, Ryan Hamm posits that there may be room for a Universalist theology and other theories of the afterlife within Evangelicalism.[108] However, what I am focusing on here are the Evangelicals who refuse to allow their defined faith, as they understand it, to be "tainted" by questionable doctrine,

[108] Ryan Hamm, "Review: Love Wins, by Rob Bell," *Relevant Magazine*, accessed April 2012. http://www.relevantmagazine.com/culture/books/reviews/25070-love-wins-by-rob-bell.

declaring that without hell, a person is not—by definition—an Evangelical, no longer saved, and in very real jeopardy of going to hell themselves.

To attempt to answer the question of *"Why now?"* I look to Lok M. Bhandari's "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries Biblically, Historically, Theologically, Culturally, and in Ministry in the 21st Century." Bhandari writes:

> It is entirely natural for evangelicals to be concerned about boundaries at this present juncture in history because the fundamentalist/evangelical movement in Protestantism is directly related to the reaction of traditionalists to the rise of modernism (and postmodernism) as the ruling cultural paradigm. The natural response is to erect boundaries in the form of various beliefs, practices to shore up an embattled worldview. A fundamentalist movement thus originates when a self-identified group of true believers draws an ideological boundary between itself and the "other" by which it feels threatened.[109]

While I have a small problem with Bhandari's assertion that fundamentalism occurs when a group defines itself in opposition to others, the sentiment behind it has merit, and can help us find the answer to this question. As Evangelicals feel pressure from all sides, whether real or imagined, the need to define itself as a stable and genuine expression of faith becomes greater and greater. When threatened by a more liberal view of salvation, not only do personal and group *identities* become important to maintain, but the need to negotiate the *boundaries* of what constitutes Evangelicalism becomes more and more important. As Bhandari writes in the above, "the natural response is to erect boundaries in the form of various beliefs."[110] This point is most obviously seen in this discussion and debate over hell, and whether hell is absolutely necessary for Evangelical theology, and ultimately, salvation.

Both Mark Driscoll and E.A. Blum have an answer for whether or not Christianity survives once hell has been removed, and unsurprisingly, the answer is a definite "no." Driscoll

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[109] Lok M. Bhandari. "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries Biblically, Historically, Theologically, Culturally, and in Ministry in the 21st Century," *Evangelical Review of Theology, Religion and Philosophy Collection* 26, no. 4 (October 2002), 293.
[110] Ibid.

in his March 27, 2011 sermon declared that "Naturalists," "Universalists," and those who believe in reincarnation—whether they believe themselves to be Evangelical or Christian, are doomed to hell *because of this one issue of doctrine*. Driscoll does allow, however, for two possibilities of alternative ideas about hell, although they are limited to Annihilationism and Purgatory, and are not direct threats or attacks against this "traditional" view of hell.[111] In addition, E.A. Blum would likely agree with Driscoll, writing:

> …issues involved in the conflict with universalism are not peripheral but central to the Christian faith. The major apologetic against universalism must be that it is unbiblical and therefore unchristian. Its major defense ('sovereign love') comes not from exegesis of biblical text but from an idea of love which has a humanistic orientation. A minor apologetic seeks to show that attempted theodicy by universalists creates far more problems than it solves. Finally, if the universalist position would turn out in the end to be correct, no lasting damage would have been done. But if the issues are as Jesus and the Christian church have proclaimed, the momentous nature of the decision concerning Christ's sacrifice is apparent. The choice is then—life or death.[112]

The issues in demarcating the boundaries of Evangelicalism, while nothing new to Evangelicalism itself are arguably inherent to groups that struggle with identity and dividing lines. Bruce Lincoln argues "there are always disagreements that separate fractions of the group from one another…Ideally [differences] identify a range of possibility within which difference and discussion are permitted, even encouraged," and when previously created definitions of the group are too rigid and narrow, or when someone crosses a line so fundamentally important to the group's and individual identities, breaks and shifts within the group, such as this response to Bell and the questioning of hell, begin to form.[113]

Imbedded in arguments over definitions and boundaries of Evangelicalism in regards to hell lies a more basic idea about the dividing line between "right belief" and outright heresy. The

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[111] Driscoll sermon, March 27.
[112] E.A. Blum, "Shall You Not Surely Die?," *Themelios*, 4, Issue 2 (1978): 61, thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/archive.
[113] Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 52.

paradigm of "us versus them" is a stalwart theory in the study of religion, and cannot be ignored in this discussion. J.Z. Smith describes it as being a process in which "the 'other' is generated by the opposition *In/Out*. That is to say, a preoccupation with boundary, with limit (in the primary sense of threshold) seems fundamental to our construction of ourselves and our relations to others."[114] Also, Bruce Lincoln expands on this specifically in relation to boundary formation and religion:

> Beyond their very real differences, all these historic projects drew their energies from sharp binary distinctions between 'us' and 'them,' in alignment with other discriminatory constraints, including moral/immoral, sacred/profane, modern/primitive, and dominant/submissive. Those who employ such discourses typically construe themselves as persons who understand and strive to realize God's will (or who strive to maintain the cosmic order, or at least to impose that order they define as rational and progressive), while characterizing their opponents as religiously ignorant and/or rebellious. The effect is to cast those against whom they direct their violence as persons who need their direction and chastisement.[115]

As Lincoln describes, Evangelicals are using the distinction between who believe in a real and literal hell for the non-believer as a "proper" Evangelical, and those who do not or openly question the belief as not a "real" Christian, and therefore not saved, effectively casting them into hell and outside the boundaries of Evangelicalism.

The "us" in this paradigm are the Evangelicals who know and hold to the truth, whose responsibility is to spread the truth of the doctrine of hell far and wide in order to either save non-Evangelicals, or to bring back those who may have crossed those created boundaries, putting them in the category of the "other." This intentional production of boundary formation and maintenance is done by either questioning the historical factuality of the belief of hell—particularly when the "other" is using history in order to argue *for* a more nuanced idea of hell—or the exegetical readings of core Biblical texts that deal with the issue. Lincoln makes a good

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[114] J.Z. Smith, "Differential Equations" in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 230.
[115] Lincoln, 34.

point in saying that those who would have previously been considered an Evangelical in the margins of said boundaries are *in need* of direction, which is precisely one of the reasons the arguments about hell have been so loud and so particularly vicious.[116]

Also, it is important to keep in mind that the debate over hell is not one coming from the outside in. Attacks on Evangelicalism and Christianity in general are nothing new, and have gone on since their beginnings. Rather, the debate is one happening from the inside—Evangelicals themselves are debating these issues, and some, like Bell, are rejecting the "traditional" belief in hell. What gets Evangelicals into so much trouble with other believers is that they have defined themselves as Evangelicals, *then* rejected hell, sometimes publicly and loudly. J.Z. Smith deals with this issue succinctly and descriptively, giving us the opportunity to understand just why the reaction to Bell in particular was so strong:

> The observation that, rather than the remote 'other' being perceived as problematic and/or dangerous, it is it proximate 'other,' the near neighbor, who is most troublesome. That is to say, while difference or 'otherness' may be perceived as being either *like-us* or *not-like-us*, it becomes most problematic when it is *too-much-like-us* or when it claims to *be-us*. It is here that the real urgency of theories of the 'other' emerges, called forth not so much by a requirement to place difference, but rather by an effort to situate ourselves. This, then, is not a matter of the 'far' but preeminently of the 'near.' The deepest intellectual issues are not based upon perceptions of alterity, but, rather, of similarity, at times, even, of identity.[117]

It could be argued then, that this debate over hell is not actually about *hell* per se. Rather, what hell represents as continual mitigation of untenable and unacceptable doctrine is the crux of the argument, and where Evangelicals have spent their time and energy fighting over. The issue of hell could, and probably will be eventually replaced by any number of other issues. The threat to Evangelicals is not the loss of Biblical interpretation or even historical understanding of the doctrine of hell. What it really is lies in the threat that there could be a predator in their midst, an

[116] Ibid.
[117] Smith, 230.

outlier who looks so much like "them" that it is near impossible to determine who belongs and who doesn't. Like I have said before, for such a fluid movement so reliant upon personally constructed definitions and boundaries, keeping the borders whole and intact is worth and necessitates the effort to go on the defensive. While this debate over the reality of hell may look like a small and ultimately inconsequential minor debate, to the Evangelical, they are crucial—and should be thought of as much.

Finally, it cannot be overlooked how real and truly awful this violent and vicious threat of everlasting torture and punishment for incorrect belief truly is. Often times when writing and thinking about the threat of a real and literal hell, it can be easy to forget how real the belief that non-believers will be *tortured in hell forever* actually is. This is not a moot point; the threat has serious, eternal, and awful consequences. Reject Christ by rejecting this doctrine of hell, and you will live to regret it for all of eternity. While the rhetoric being used is admittedly not the same as someone screaming hellfire and damnation at non-believers for hours on end in the public square in order to convince them to convert, the threat is the same. Jason C. Bivins does an excellent job of researching the way that these violent threats are used in order to produce specific results, most often being total conversion, as being an example of a "religion of fear."[118]

While Bivins is primarily interested in how this "religion of fear" is used in political and popular arenas (such as Cold War politics and the emergence of Jack Chick's horrific "Chick Tracts,") this is a good way to understand how these threats are being deployed. By emphasizing what is at stake—*eternal damnation*—Evangelicals have a method in which to deploy their arguments for their specific boundary definitions. While the threat is more than one of a "turn or

[118] Jason C. Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

burn" approach because it is primarily aimed at the believer or one who has left these constraints of Evangelicalism, the methods and threats are strikingly similar.

Conclusion

I have argued that the Evangelical construction of hell is problematic in that it lacks historical nuance, and is intentionally produced specifically to deal with issues surrounding identity politics and to create and reaffirm boundary lines surrounding "Evangelicalism" itself. The construct of "us/them" regarding Evangelical/non-believer is an important one, most crucial to both Evangelical identities and boundaries. However, there is always something more to be said about any particular topic, and my work will not be the definitive answer to the issues of Evangelicalism and hell.

While researching this particular moment in Evangelicalism, as well as the historical record for this belief in hell, I was constantly saddled with my own doubts of the importance of this work. The question I kept coming back to, time and time again, was "So what?" So what if Evangelicals have interpreted the historical belief in hell incorrectly and without the nuance a scholar so desires, and have used hell to create identities and boundaries in which to live and situate themselves? Doesn't every religious group do this, at least in some way or another? In attempting to alleviate my doubts, I found that the answer to this question was just as important as the issue I have studied itself.

The issue of Evangelicalism and their relationship to hell cannot be one that we as scholars of religion slough off as obvious or too inconsequential to require study. If we allow for reasoning such as this, we allow room for doubt in regards to the importance of our field. We must take the claims made by Evangelicals seriously to attempt to understand the finer points, however small, of how religion works in a community of believers. Also, a response to this work as "so what?" is ultimately too reductive of a position to honestly take and completely

dissatisfying, as there are real consequences and an abundance of information and knowledge to be gained by comparing the less nuanced Evangelical version of Christian history to the more factual historical record. However, it is not enough to say that they're wrong. The Evangelical construction or idea of hell as it stands may not be entirely factual, but that's not the point. Rather, there is something larger at stake here, something else at work, and this research and subsequent work has been my attempt to understand it that much more. With that being said, and knowing the problems of presenting anything as completely "factual", especially the historical record, I can positively say that even if the Evangelical construction of history is correct, the lack of a nuanced understanding of this history means something, and tells us much about identity and boundaries, especially in regards to such a tenuous religious movement such as Evangelicalism.

Hell is interesting. And confusing. Understanding the minute details of hell can obviously tell us a lot about the way history is used to create a linear narrative, influence created identities, and form and maintain border lines. For the sake of time and in the interest of my previous arguments, I have refused to research and integrate certain implications that are brought up by my work on hell. Some include Jason C. Bivins' "religion of fear" and the implications such fear has in the creation of personal identities. Another includes Elaine Pagels' important research on the origin and history of Satan. As Satan is popularly thought to inhabit hell, the menacing figure undoubtedly has much to do in regards to the history of hell. And one that I hope to continue researching as is perhaps the most interesting of these options involves the quintessential American identity, and how American-ness works in relation to the history and use of the doctrine of hell. Whether or not this is something specifically "American," or just a product of Evangelicalism itself deserves and needs further study. But it is enough to say here that history has proven to be a substantial element to both identity politics and boundary formation.

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